

Encouraging Staff Collaboration

We began the “Community Support Team” to bring together cultural liaisons, district leaders, social workers, and teachers to provide guidance on what was happening in the field, helpful resources and how to best share them...It’s very helpful to have this group to discuss and contribute ideas and members to do fact-checking or check in with others with related experience. Team members said they really appreciated the time to be together and share their thoughts and feelings with others.

– [Kristina Robertson](#), English Learner Program Administrator, Roseville Public Schools, Minnesota

Key Takeaways

- Collaboration can greatly improve the ways schools support immigrant families by bringing multiple perspectives to the table, increasing opportunities to share information, and allowing staff to identify ways to make their outreach more efficient and effective.
- In addition, teachers’ unions can play an important role in collaboration and outreach to immigrant families.



See this information online

Encouraging Staff Collaboration

- View online: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/collaboration>
- Download PDF:
<http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/collaboration-pdf>

Complete guide: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide>

Excerpted from *How to Support Immigrant Students and Families*.

Overview

The staff who work with English Language Learner (ELL) and immigrant families (ESOL specialists, ELL/bilingual paraprofessionals, parent liaisons, interpreters, etc.) are a valuable asset. They know these students and families well, perhaps better than anyone in the school, and will be able to bring important insights to any conversations regarding the questions and concerns of students and families. Including them as equal and respected members of the team is a critical step towards collaboration. Nevertheless, they cannot be expected to manage these issues singlehandedly, nor to be experts on the issues and questions (particularly around legal topics) that immigrant families may have.

The most successful approaches to collaboration will be school-wide/program-wide, led by administrators and involving all:

- ESOL teachers, bilingual staff and liaisons, and interpreters
- classroom teachers and counselors
- custodial, cafeteria, administrative, and bussing staff
- administration
- substitute teachers
- school resource officers/security personnel.

These professionals will have a wide range of interactions with students at different times and in different settings. Not only are there certain guidelines they should be following related to immigrant students, but they can be a valuable source for support and ideas. As a team, you can brainstorm ways to engage members of the staff around these issues. Here are some strategies for engaging staff and encouraging collaboration.



Designate a point person on immigration issues

Why this matters

Having a lead contact on immigration issues can make it easier for the whole staff to stay updated. This might be a parent liaison, social worker, ELL or bilingual teacher, or someone else who has contacts with families and community organizations that are monitoring changing events closely. This person can also stay up-to-date on policy, what other districts are doing, and when outside guidance will be needed.

Tips for getting started

- Identify a staff member who is well-versed in immigration issues, or interested in learning. If it is a role you'd like to take on, consider volunteering!
- Look for resources that will help you stay-up-date, as well as professional networks and resources (both in the community and online).
- Find your "go-to" contacts who can answer questions and provide guidance on legal questions.

Recommended resources

- [Glossary of Common Terms: Immigration](#) (Immigrants Rising)



Consider creating an immigrant support team

Why this matters

A number of districts around the country are creating immigrant (or “community”) support teams to pull together multiple perspectives on how best to support students. This might include administrators, parent liaisons, ESOL/bilingual teachers, classroom teachers, counselors or social workers, other staff members, parents, students, and community members.

Tips for getting started

- Discuss the needs that are most urgent to address.
- Consider whether a similar model might be useful in supporting other populations or whether you can learn lessons from other school-/district-wide teams.
- Start with small goals that are achievable and realistic for the group.
- Spend some time getting to know each other and building trust.
- Take time to reflect and relax as a group.
- Identify possible partners in the community.

Recommended resources

- [All Hands on Deck: Creating Immigrant Support Teams in Topeka](#) (Sarah Fladwood-Handley – Elementary ELL Coach, Topeka, Kansas)
- [Finding Answers for Our Immigrant Students and Families](#) (Kristina Robertson, ELL Program Administrator – Roseville Public Schools, Minnesota)



Immigrant support teams

Harrisonburg, VA

Superintendent [Scott Kizner](#) writes about his (former) district’s crisis team:

Staffs representing the departments have been assigned to keep informed of events and information pertaining to immigration. The team consists of our community coordinator, head of psychological services, assistant superintendents, HS principal, EL coordinators. We are also working with [New Bridges](#), an agency that serves immigrants...This group is prepared to respond to situations quickly if necessary.



Immigrant support teams (continued)

Topeka, KS

ELL elementary coach Sarah Fladwood-Handley describes the [immigrant support teams](#) created in Topeka, KS, which have had far-reaching effects:

After creating our plan and holding our initial parent sessions, with the support of district administration, we suggested each school form Immigrant Support Teams that could include, but are not limited to: ELL teachers, administrators, social workers, counselors, interpreters, and front office staff. The Immigrant Support Team could:

- *create a plan in the event a student's family member is detained, not able to be located, or other related crisis*
- *provide support for students experiencing immigration-related crisis and/or stress*
- *help educate classroom teachers and staff regarding students' rights, present ideas for teachers, and be knowledgeable about resources.*

So far schools have received this information very well and most schools have begun to form their teams. Many schools are also putting immigration-related stress as a topic for discussion at mental health team meetings.

Roseville, MN

Kristina Robertson describes her efforts to create a [Community Support Team](#), which also included cultural liaisons from the African-American and Native American communities. The group's collaboration was particularly important following a local crisis – the shooting of Philando Castille by a police officer. Philando was a nutrition services worker in a neighboring district who had close ties to students and staff in Kristina's district:

The shooting shook our community. We have been working with youth and families to address that tragedy and to develop ways to increase safety, so it seemed like a natural connection for our Community Support Team. That's why we didn't have "Immigrant" in the title. We want the team's work to be flexible and to encompass whatever concerns may arise in our community.



Collaborate with the local teachers' union

Why this matters

An additional ally in this work may be your local, state, or national teachers' union. The American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association have done extensive work supporting immigrant students, families, and educators, including:

- “know your rights” training (both in-person and online)
- sharing educator testimonials
- offering guidance on what steps teachers can take to support students
- providing support for “DACA-mented” teachers (teachers with DACA)
- providing legal guidance and support for teachers with questions about advocacy.

One educator wrote in our survey, “Our teacher's union has pulled together a number of resources and toolkits for teachers – the unions can be a great resource.”

Tips for getting started

- Ask your local union about what resources they have on topics of interest.
- Take a look at these national immigration websites for additional resources:
 - [American Federation of Teachers](#)
 - [National Education Association](#)



Clarify what is allowed in terms of advocacy and outreach

Why this matters

Many teachers have questions about what they are allowed to do in terms of outreach to immigrant families. Schools and districts are handling this issue differently, especially regarding the use of school facilities and teacher involvement in sharing information on families' rights. Questions may arise about meeting on school property, inviting outside advocates or lawyers to meet with families, or sending home "know your rights" pamphlets.

Districts have different kinds of approaches to this kind of outreach, including:

- clear guidance to staff about what is permitted, such as the example of Superintendent [Scott Kizner](#) of Stafford County Schools, VA (formerly the leader of Harrisonburg, VA schools)
- quiet support of teachers sharing contact information of immigrant organizations
- explicit prohibition of any activity on this issue.

Often teachers themselves are looking for guidance from the district. One teacher noted, "In my city, in Texas, there are 5 different school districts and each district has their own interpretation of what teachers are allowed to do, which limits us."

Tips for getting started

For school/district leaders

- Find out whether your district has a policy regarding educator advocacy and outreach, and if so, learn what it includes.
- Talk with educators to find out what their questions are, which may already be addressed by current policy. Chances are that if a few teachers have questions, others do too. Staff may wish to be supportive of students but fearful of repercussions.
- Take steps to clarify related policy for staff, and consider creating a policy if none exists.

For educators

- Ask building leaders, district officials, and your local teacher's union about what is permitted. Your state may also have some guidance on this issue.
- Share what you learn with colleagues and leaders in your building and district.





Asking until you get an answer

A teacher who responded to our 2017 survey noted,

I haven't been able to find resources for teachers like me, who are in districts where they're not getting the directive or support from administration. I need to understand what the parameters are for what I can and should say to support students without putting myself at risk of being reprimanded or fired.

We followed up with this educator, and as it turned out, she had asked her questions so many times that she had been scheduled for a meeting with her superintendent. He was surprised to learn of the impacts of these issues on their district's immigrant families.

That meeting led to a district-level communication effort and clarification of policy – and to [an article on Colorín Colorado!](#) Her story is a powerful example of the impact that one person can have, as well as of the kinds of advocacy that educators are doing every day on behalf of their students.

She wrote in our article,

I was affirmed in my instinct that I had to keep talking to everyone I could in any kind of leadership position in order to try to serve my students well. Everyone knew that I was acting out of concern for my students, so they were open to talking with me. My persistence eventually got me both the audience, and information, I needed.

I also learned that arming myself with information before I had these conversations was really useful – I needed to feel confident in what I knew and clear about what I was asking for. It helped to rehearse what I wanted to say to the superintendent before the meeting – so I could share the stories and information in a clear, concise way and link those stories to my requests for clarification and information.

Editorial note: Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the teacher requested that we not share her name or school district.



Share personal stories

Why this matters

A personal story can be a powerful tool. Stories help colleagues, leaders, and community members understand how or why a particular issue is impacting a student or family in ways that other kinds of information may not. For example, when Mandy Manning, the 2018 National Teacher of the Year, traveled to Washington, DC to receive her award, she took the opportunity to [share a stack of her immigrant/refugee students'](#) letters with the White House as a way of lifting up her students' experiences.

Note: You can learn more about Mandy's experiences from [her interview](#) with Colorín Colorado, as well as from her remarks at a Migration Policy Institute panel discussion about UNESCO's 2018 report, [Migration, Displacement, and Education: Building Bridges, Not Walls](#).

Tips for getting started

If you decide that you would like to include some personal stories as part of outreach or training efforts:

- invite individuals who have publicly shared their stories to talk with colleagues, such as students, parents, staff members (i.e., [teachers working with DACA](#)), and community members
- share student stories on their behalf, respecting privacy
- share online videos of students, teachers, and celebrities talking about these issues.

You can also help students tell their stories with the ideas shared in the Colorín Colorado article [Building Bridges Through Storytelling: What Are Your Students' Stories?](#)

Note: Do careful planning before these activities. Never assume that an individual is willing to talk about their story publicly, or that others know the same information that you do. Also, keep in mind that some students [may not wish to share information](#) about their home country, immigration story, or place of birth in classroom activities (see more on [the topic of immigrant students' silence below](#)).



Recommended resources

- [Building Bridges Through Storytelling: What Are Your Students' Stories?](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [Rusul Alrubail: I was a refugee. I'm haunted by today's images of child refugees](#) (PBS NewsHour)
- News coverage of Lizandro and Diego Claros Saravia, brothers deported after an immigration check-in from [The Washington Post](#), [NBC News](#), and [Sports Illustrated](#)
- [Common Bond for Miami Schools Chief, Student: Being Undocumented](#) (Education Week)

Resources from Re-imagining Migration

- [Educator Spotlight: Engaging Stories of Migration to Tell Our Own](#)
- [Poem – "Refuge"](#): JJ Bola reading his poem about his experiences as a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (video)
- [Poem – "Where I'm From"](#): A poem by a student, Karolen, inspired by [Jean-Michel Dissard's I Learn America Project](#)

Recommended videos

- [Videos: ELL and Immigrant Student Stories](#)
- [A Long Journey on a Cattle Raft](#) (Diana Alqadhi, English Language Development Specialist – Dearborn, Michigan)
- [Student Reporting Labs: Immigration Videos](#) (PBS NewsHour)
- [Syrian children in Turkey heal through storytelling](#) (PBS NewsHour)

Note: See additional examples of personal stories in our section on the [impact of immigration issues](#) on students.



Moving stories app

The [Moving Stories app](#), offered by Re-imagining Migration, allows students to record their families' stories and view other students' stories. The App and these accompanying lessons provide an opportunity to build empathy and understanding across diverse student experiences. It also offers empowering experiences for (often) invisible students in the classroom.